

Winds of Change

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Winds of Change

by [Pipergirl17](#)

Summary

Daryl Dixon has led a rough life. Raised by an abusive father, heavily influenced by a brother who is a drug addict and petty criminal, he's always believed that people like him don't fit into normal society. But when he meets Beth Greene, a slip of a woman who's about to shake his world to its foundation, he's left to question everything he thought about his place in the world.

Notes

This is a sequel to A Deal's A Deal. I wanted to get a peek into Daryl's mind, to see what he was thinking, so here we are!

A great big thanks to my beta SquishyCool for her extra set of eyes on this story (and for the fangirling, too!).

Alas, I do not own even the tiniest piece of The Walking Dead and am not profiting from this story - it's all in good fun!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Daryl pulled into his driveway and cut the engine, staring ahead at his house. His heart sank when he saw the lights were still on. It meant Merle was up, most likely as eager as anything to grill his 'baby bro' on the juicy details of his date.

He sighed, stepped out of the truck and lit himself a cigarette, enjoying a last bit of quiet before heading in. He'd been in a good mood on the drive back, replaying his evening with Beth, remembering the way she made him laugh (Christ, how long had it been since he'd really laughed?) and the feel of her beneath him, all soft touches and gentle sighs. Their talk about work had also been on his mind, especially the part about having money in his pocket that didn't have anything to do with drugs or stolen goods. Her reaction had surprised him; she'd neither encouraged nor discouraged him, instead zeroing on the mess it would create with his brother. For someone who came from a normal background, she seemed to have an uncanny knack for understanding the Dixon family dynamics.

He knew how Merle would react to him trying to go on the straight and narrow, though. He'd throw him the same old bullshit he always did: "Ain't nobody gonna care about ya like I do," or "Ain't worth trying cause no one's gonna hire redneck trash like you." Those lines had always worked in the past because Daryl had never had a reason to know otherwise.

But now he had Beth. And after just a few hours she'd persuaded him that people didn't treat him like shit because he was a redneck or because they thought they were better than him, but because he treated them like shit first.

He'd tested her theory out when he'd stopped at Sam's Food Mart to buy more smokes, nodding at the man behind the counter in greeting and then thanking him. Instead of eyeing him suspiciously like he always did, the older man smiled and made small talk, asking him if the heat had let up any. It was a surreal experience for him, to have people treat him civilly, but what was more surprising was how much he'd enjoyed it.

Might as well get it over with. He dropped his cigarette butt in the gravel and crushed it with the toe of his boot, then trudged up the walk to the front door, stepping around a pile of stolen lumber one of Merle's friends had dropped off earlier that week.

As soon as he opened the screen door, Merle's voice called out from the living room. "Darylina! Back already?! S'only eleven thirty!" he taunted, his words heavily slurred.

"Christ," Daryl muttered under his breath. "Yeah, I'm back," he called out louder so Merle could hear him. He stopped at the fridge to grab himself a beer but thought better of it. What he really wanted was to go to bed and sort out all the thoughts bouncing around in his head, and alcohol wouldn't help any.

Merle appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily against the frame. Not for the first time he reminded Daryl of their father. He had the same tall, solid build as Will Dixon, but it was his stance that did it, stooped, unsteady on his feet, half-empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Red dangling from his fingertips.

But his brother didn't elicit the same fear his dad once had and Daryl met his gaze squarely before sitting down at the table, perusing the front page of the local paper.

"Well?" Merle finally asked. He'd never been the patient one.

"Well what?" Daryl replied, not giving anything away. He scanned an article about an upcoming antiques sale, waiting for his brother to take the bait.

Merle let out a raspy chuckle. "That bad, huh? Toldja she'd be stuck up. Them artsy chicks are all like that; no time of day for a regular guy like you."

Daryl bristled at the dig but didn't take the bait. Without looking up from the paper, he replied, "Had us a nice dinner at Rosie's, then we went for a drive outside of town."

When he was met with an unexpected silence, he finally did look up. Merle stood there frowning, his whiskey-addled mind trying to figure out whether his younger brother was serious.

"You ain't shittin' me, are ya?" he asked, realizing that Daryl was telling the truth.

"Nope. Matter of fact, she's expecting me to ask her on a second date." He pointed to the paper. "I'm thinkin' she might like to go to the antiques sale they're having on the fairgrounds; she mentioned something about needing some more furniture for her apartment."

Merle stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "Christ almighty," he said, still dead serious. "What'd she do, let you give it to her up the ass?"

Daryl stood up suddenly, his chair tilting precariously before setting back on all four legs. He took a deep breath, trying his damndest not to let Merle goad him into a fight, and gripped the corners of the table. "Beth's a good woman, Merle. You'll want to remember that when you're talkin' about her. She's the only person who's treated me half decent in a long while."

Despite his inebriety, the elder Dixon seemed to understand the gravity of his brother's statement. "Come on, little brother," he pleaded with a weak chuckle. "I've always had yer back."

Daryl always expected there would be a lot more yelling involved when this conversation finally took place, maybe some punches thrown in for good measure, too; that was usually how their 'discussions' progressed. He'd imagined it a dozen different ways over the past twenty years at least, but none of them involved having a rational talk. Now that it was out in the open, though, he found he was too tired for fisticuffs or even raised voices. "No you haven't. I been beside you and behind you, but I ain't never been ahead of you. Ain't no one in this world more important to you than yourself, Merle. You put me down 'cause it makes you feel better about yourself. I spent my whole life hearin' how no one's ever gonna like me, no one's ever gonna respect me, and I always thought you were doing it for my own good. But you were doing it for you, so you don't end up alone."

A few steps took him across the kitchen to where his brother stood. "We're brothers and ain't nothing ever gonna change that, Merle. But maybe it's time for me to get out from under your

shadow."

"You go ahead," his brother countered, his voice as quiet as Daryl's, "but I don't wanna hear any bitchin' when she gets tired of hearing about timing belts and gutting squirrels. It's only ever been the two of us and that's all it's ever gonna be."

Merle was right on one count: it always *had* been just the two of them. His brother might have seen their time as rosy, but if it was a bed of roses, Merle got the flowers and Daryl had been stuck with all of the thorns. Thing was, after tonight, Daryl knew - didn't just think it, but *knew* - it didn't have to be like that.

"No it ain't. I had enough of this shit tonight. I'm goin' to bed." He walked by the other man, shifting to avoid the hand that shot out to stop him. When he walked into his bedroom and quietly closed the door behind him, he was surprised to find out he wasn't angry so much as tired. Tired of Merle and his bullshit, tired of being a 36 year old with nothing to his name, and tired of living in a dump. He looked at his room, disgusted with the mess he'd become accustomed to; it only took a few minutes of tidying to make it look half-decent, picking clothes up off the floor, stacking magazines, gathering up empty bottles. He even changed the sheets on his bed, the mundane task keeping his mind occupied.

Daryl stared at his phone and considered calling Beth but thought better of it; she had said, after all, she had to turn in early because of work.

He felt like such a pussy sitting by a phone hemming and hawing over whether or not to call a girl. That inner monologue was Merle's voice, though. And his dad's voice. All the negative shit that had been drilled into him over the years. It was hard not to hear it, not to believe it; it was instinct by now, was just the way his mind worked.

But once he pushed through the dark thoughts and forced himself to rationally assess the situation, he didn't feel so much like a loser. It was a pretty sure bet Beth would enjoy the antiques market; it seemed like the sort of thing she'd be into, seeing as she was artsy and community-minded. She'd probably know loads of folks and have a smile and kind words for them, too.

He undressed, tossing his clothes haphazardly on the floor before catching himself; that would be a hard habit to break. He picked them up and placed them on top of the pile he'd made, turned his light off and let himself fall back onto his bed.

The sound of whatever garbage Merle was watching on TV served as background noise as he relaxed, closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, sinking back into his mattress. Despite his fatigue, his mind spun in circles, from his childhood to Beth to finding a job and back again. It finally settled on the young woman, the recent memory of her warm smile and soft femininity lulling him into a deep sleep.

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The next morning Daryl found out there isn't all that much to asking a nice girl out on a date when she's as eager as you are to meet up again.

The worst, really, had been drumming up the courage to actually make the call. He'd spent ten minutes staring at his phone as if it had herpes and then five more minutes picking it up and putting it back down before giving himself a figurative kick in the seat, Dixon-style. "For fuck's sake, quit pussyin' around and call her already," he growled before picking up the phone and pressing Beth's number.

"Hi, Daryl," she answered, her voice sweet and a little shy.

"Hey," he replied, the sound of her voice soothing his nerves.

"I... I had a nice time last night," she whispered as if trying to keep the conversation away from prying ears.

He couldn't help but smile, her admission taking a weight off his shoulders. "Me too," he admitted. *Go ahead, here's your chance.* "Look, I'm callin' cause there's an antiques fair comin' to town next weekend and I was wondering if you wanted to go. You don't have to if you don't..."

"Yes! I'd love to!" she replied, cutting him off. "I was reading about it in the paper last night and was hoping to find someone to go with." She paused, before adding playfully, "like, a good-lookin' guy with a pickup truck..."

"In that case I can see if Merle's free that day..."

"No!" the young woman interjected, laughing loudly. "Don't you dare!"

"Don't worry," he reassured her, "I'd rather keep you all to myself anyway."

He could almost hear her smile, if that was possible. "I'd rather that, too. Why don't you pick me up at my place at nine? That'll give us lots of time to look around before the crowds get too thick."

"Sounds fair to me. Let me find something to write with so I can take your address down; can never find a friggin' pen that works around here. Hold on." Daryl put the phone down and walked over to the living room to where Merle kept his New York Times crossword puzzle, grabbing the pen that was clipped to the paper. It was the only sure bet for finding a working pen in less than ten minutes. He'd just have to remember to return it or else he'd never hear the end of it.

When he picked the phone back up, Beth was singing to herself; her voice was lovely and he was tempted to stay silent just to hear more. Instead, he cleared his throat, regretting it when the singing stopped. "Found one," he confirmed, reaching for an envelope that was lying within easy reach. He took down the address she gave him and, after a brief good-bye, hung up the phone.

Hearing Merle snoring from where he'd passed out in the living room, Daryl came to the realisation that asking the girl out had been the easy part.

The hard part was going to be convincing his brother to lend him the truck again. Some days Merle would just as soon burn his own truck down than let him borrow it; the only thing Daryl could do was try and catch him in a generous mood.

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When the following Saturday morning arrived Daryl was more on edge than usual. He sat at the kitchen table with his leg bouncing, a habit he'd always had when anxious. He'd been staring at the front page of the paper, trying to focus on a story about a local war vet who was trying to reintegrate with society, when Merle threw his spoon down in his bowl with a clang.

"Daryl, if you don't chill out, I swear I'm gonna tie you up and take her out to the fair m'self."

Instead of arguing back, the younger Dixon stopped fidgeting and gave his brother a nod. "Sorry, man. I'm just... dunno, nervous I guess."

Merle gave him an exasperated look. "The fuck you got to be nervous about? You asked her if she wants to go and she said yes, right?"

"Well, yeah, 'course she agreed."

"Then stop acting like a fuckin' pussy. You ain't got nothin' to be nervous about." He shook his head and walked towards the front door, grabbing a cap on the way. "I'll be back on Monday. Mitch needs a backup man for a job over in Thomaston."

Daryl heard the screen door slam shut behind his brother and sighed. There was no way he had the attention span at that point to read much more than the funnies, so he folded the paper and got up. Just as he was tossing it into the trash, he heard the rumble of the truck's engine.

No. Merle wouldn't. Not after everything he'd made Daryl do to earn that truck; the week's worth of cigarettes, the bottle of Johnnie Walker black, the damn near begging. Just for One. Fucking. Day.

He ran out just in time to see Merle backing out of the driveway, carefully navigating the truck around his motorcycle. "Have fun at your fair!" he taunted as he sped away, tires squealing on the worn asphalt of their street.

"Mother fucker!" Daryl kicked the nearest thing, which happened to be a coffee tin serving as an ashtray, watching it hit a pile of lumber and fall over. Its contents spilled onto the gravel and he stood there staring at them, his anger giving way to a hollow feeling.

By all means, he should be used to it by now. He had a lifetime of being taken advantage of by Merle. Of having his expectations raised and then dashed. Of being strung along, mocked, lied to. Just like Charlie Brown with Lucy and her fucking football. Except nowhere near as funny.

He stared at the spot where the truck had been parked. How the hell was he supposed to pick Beth up now? Call a cab? That would be a hell of an impression to make on a second date;

would likely ensure a third one never took place, he mused sourly.

His phone rang just as he was turning to walk back inside. ““Lo?””

"Hi," Beth said, sounding like she was outside. "I just remembered I have to stop by the store and pick something up. Is it okay if I drive to your place, then we could go to the fair from there?"

And just like that, fate handed him another chance.

"That'd be more than okay," he replied. "Merle just took the truck for the weekend."

"What?" she asked, her tone incredulous. "After everything he put you through to have it today? That... *asshole!*"

"Well, that's Merle in one word," he said, resigned.

"I'm sorry you gotta deal with him, Daryl. That just ain't fair."

"No, it ain't," he agreed.

He heard a car door slam in the background, followed by the start of an engine. "Okay. I'm leaving right now and should be at your place by nine-thirty at the latest."

Daryl looked over at the clock on the wall and saw it was quarter to nine. "Sounds good," he replied. "See you then." He hung up the phone after she said goodbye and then looked at the state of the house.

Beer bottles, liquor bottles, take-out containers, newspapers, dirty dishes, overflowing ashtrays... Until then, he'd never given a second thought to the condition of his house; he and Merle both had days where they reached their breaking point, but those were few and far between. And although he knew Beth wouldn't judge him, or wouldn't comment on the mess, he felt compelled to make a good impression.

Rolling up his sleeves, figuratively of course, he dug in, intent on making as much of a dent in the mess as possible before nine-thirty.

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Daryl stood at the sink, washing the last of the dishes, when he heard a car approaching. He looked out the window and saw Beth's car pull up along the curb in front of his house.

Focused on his housework, he hadn't noticed how dark the skies had become, the ominous grey clouds telling him they were in for one hell of a summer storm.

He watched Beth dash from her car to his front door, a rectangular parcel firmly tucked under her arm, trying to beat the rain. Just as she cleared the threshold, the skies opened up.

"Looks like I made it inside just in the nick of time," she laughed, trying to catch her breath from the sprint. While her gaze was focused outside on the torrential rain, Daryl stood behind

her, mesmerized by the sight of her in a light green dress and her hair up in a ponytail. She looked so pure. It had been a long, long time since there had been a woman in his house, and none of them had ever been as good for him as Beth.

She turned around to face him. “Hi,” she said, smiling shyly.

Daryl was momentarily struck dumb by his reaction to her being in his home, a visceral sense of relief, like being in the dark for so long and having someone let sunlight in. Having her here was confirmation he hadn’t imagined her, or her goodness, or her belief in him. *You ain’t a bad man*, she’d told him.

Not a bad man. He *really* wanted to believe her.

“Hey,” he replied, shaking himself from his musings. “Here, let me help you with that.” He reached out and took the parcel from her, placing it on the floor and leaning against the wall.

“Thanks,” she said, looking around her unabashedly. Daryl could only imagine what was going through her mind, seeing the stained floor tiles, the hole in the wall Merle had made a few weeks ago when he’d fallen over drunk, and the ceiling fan with just two blades and no cover over the light. He was pretty sure she’d never lived in a place like it.

“Think the inside could win a contest, too?” he joked, trying to ease his nerves.

“Hmm. S’got potential. You just need a bit of...” She tapped her fingertip on her chin, pretending to think.

“TNT?”

Giggling, she bridged the gap separating them, reaching up and wrapping her arms around his neck. She wore a light perfume, something floral, and Daryl didn’t fight the urge to nuzzle the spot where her neck and shoulder met. The action drew a contented sigh from her lips.

“I missed you this week.” She pulled back and looked at him, blue eyes serious, gaze searching his. “Silly, ain’t it? I mean, we practically just met, but I feel like we’ve been together for longer.” Smiling, she wrinkled her nose, making a face. “I’m probably sounding crazy...”

“Nah,” he shook his head. “Not sounding crazy at all. Hell, I keep thinkin’ Merle dropped something in my drink and I’m just imagining you.”

Needing to prove himself otherwise, Daryl leaned in and paused a hair's breadth from her mouth, feeling a warm puff of air escape her parted lips. The first sweep of his lips was light, tentative, as if he were giving her the opportunity to pull back. When she sighed and pushed forward, he gave in to the desire that had been building over the course of the past week.

The kiss quickly intensified and Daryl felt his head swim with desire. The memory of her beneath him, wet with need, begging him for more, had stayed fresh in his mind all week; he hadn’t jacked off so much since he was a teenager. He needed this. He needed *her*.

One hand shot out to her side, holding her tightly to him, the other cupping the back of her head. She clung to him desperately, her tongue caressing his, her teeth nipping at his lower lip. Delicate hands moved to his chest, short fingernails scratching him through his T-shirt as she dragged them downwards to where they twirled and twisted in his belt loops.

The kiss ended when they both pulled away, panting, pulses racing. Beth's cheeks were flushed, her ponytail askew from where he'd pulled it. It was everything for Daryl not to just haul her over his shoulder and take her to his bedroom.

Instead, he accepted the parcel she'd picked back up and offered him. "For me?" he asked, frowning, not sure if he was reading her intention correctly.

"For you and Merle," she clarified, shrugging. "Although, with him bein' an asshole and everything, you can just keep it for yourself if you want."

He stared at her for a moment and she returned his gaze, her eyes warm and friendly. "Well, go on," she prodded, "open it up so you can see what it is."

"Alright, alright," he replied, walking to the kitchen with her following behind. "Pushy woman," he added under his breath, chuckling when she stuck her tongue out at him. He plucked a knife from the sheath on his belt and carefully unwrapped the gift, peeling away the layers of paper until he was holding a framed picture.

It was a photograph of his house, professionally framed and matted. Daryl stared at it, confused; then it dawned on him that it must've been the picture she'd taken that first day they'd met, the one that won her the contest.

He'd always hated the house, right from the day he, Merle, and their dad had moved in. It had already been run down back then, dark, dirty and ugly, especially to a kid. Years of neglect after that hadn't made it any more of a home. If anything, it seemed to loom even more uninviting than ever.

The longer he stared at the photograph, though, the more Beth's vision revealed itself to him. Somehow, she had managed to convey her own impressions through the image; it was as if he was seeing it through her eyes, understanding how her mind was processing what it saw. It was as if she'd managed to tell an entire story in one frame: where the house had been, what it had witnessed in its years, what its story was.

He felt her nestle herself into his side, loosely wrapping an arm around his waist. "You're bein' awfully quiet," she commented, her voice quiet and tentative.

"I'm appreciating the artwork," he replied, giving her a side glance. "I can see what you were talking about, with seeing the house's character and all. It's nice. I like it." She returned his gaze, her blue eyes dancing, and gave him a smile that made him want to move mountains. Beth was so genuinely nice that he almost found it difficult to take it at face value; but there were no ulterior motives, no hidden agenda. There was just whatever was written plainly on her face.

Daryl placed the picture down flat on the table and turned to face her, unsure of what to do next. This was still all so new to him, this... whatever it was he had with her. He'd never had a girlfriend before, nothing that had involved more than just a booty call, and he'd certainly never been with anyone who wasn't hanging around for a drink or for Merle's drugs.

But Beth was here for *him*. Not for drugs, not for booze, and certainly not for Merle.

She jumped when a loud clap of thunder boomed. "Guess we ain't going to the fair in this weather." She sighed dramatically, shrugging. "Looks like we'll just have to find something else to pass the time."

Daryl frowned, wondering what she meant until she arched an eyebrow, staring at him like she couldn't believe he hadn't caught on. The realisation of what she meant, what she still wanted, lit a fire deep in his belly. He reached out and skimmed a calloused finger down her arm, the sun-kissed skin soft beneath his touch. "Something to pass the time, huh?" he repeated. "I'm gonna guess you ain't talking about readin' the Bible together."

He slid his fingers back upwards until they alighted on her collarbone. Beth made a satisfied humming sound, leaning into his touch. "Not exactly what I had in mind, no," she admitted, reaching out to cup his cheek in her hand. She leaned forward, rising up on her tiptoes, and pressed her lips to his.

Lightning flashed brightly in the darkened sky, followed by another loud clap of thunder. The rain was still driving hard, large drops pelting the house's awnings, a strong wind coming in through the kitchen window blowing the papers he'd stacked up off the counter.

The pace of their kiss quickly caught up with that of the tempest outside, the embrace becoming frenzied and needy. Somehow they'd moved until Beth was caught between him and one of the kitchen walls, and Daryl took the opportunity to let his mouth and hands wander over the increasingly familiar territory of her soft curves.

His head swam from all the sensations that were hitting him at once: the salty tang of her skin, the heat of her body, the soft encouraging sounds she was making. As his lips reclaimed hers hungrily, his mouth slanted against hers, tongues dancing, his fingers skimmed up her thighs, gathering the skirt of her dress on their ascent.

When he got to the waistband of her panties, tickling the smooth skin just above, Beth reached between them and tugged at his belt, somehow managing to undo it on her first try. Her deft fingers worked on his fly but faltered when he brought his hand to her front, slipping one finger inside her.

She was already wet for him, her panties soaked. "Been thinking of this all week," she whispered. More coyly, she added, "Actually, I've been doing more than just thinking."

Her words went straight to Daryl's cock. "Christ, girl," he groaned, "you're gonna kill me." He tentatively trailed his finger along her cleft, circling the sensitive bundle of nerves at each circuit.

He wanted to please her, wanted to drive her as crazy as she drove him, wanted to hear her shout his name as she came undone.

Beth gasped, her hands pulling away from his jeans, shooting up to grip his biceps. He raised his head and her eyes met his, the blue of her irises nearly devoured by her pupils, before she tilted her head back and let out a low moan.

"Yes," she exhaled, standing on her tiptoes in an effort to grind against his hand. The sight alone was enough to drive a man insane.

Daryl curled his free arm around her waist, but he couldn't have said if it was to keep Beth or himself up.

Emboldened by her reaction to his ministrations, he inserted two fingers inside her, circling her clit with his thumb. "I want you to come for me," he whispered in her ear, feeling her motions become more jerky and uncoordinated.

"Don'tstopdon'tstopdon'tstop," she begged, taking in short, shallow, lungfuls of air, pressing herself more desperately against him. Then suddenly she paused, not moving, not breathing, before letting out a keening wail, calling out his name as she rode out her climax.

When she managed to gather her bearings, she leaned forward and crushed her mouth to his in a messy, needy embrace. Her hands flew back to his pants, clumsily pushing them down as far as she could reach without breaking the kiss.

Daryl rebuffed her uncoordinated efforts. "You take care of yours and I'll take care of mine," he grunted, pulling his T-shirt off and shimmying out of his pants and underwear.

When he straightened up, he took a step towards her and placed one hand on her thigh, moving it upward.

Beth's eyes were still dark and focused on him, her kiss-swollen lips slightly parted. She reached out and took him in her hand, stroking his cock with a slow, deliberate pace. "Daryl Dixon," she said, her voice husky, chest still rising deeply from her climax, "you better have a condom nearby or I might just cave in to some very unwise decisions."

"Wallet," he answered, unable to string any words together. Letting go of her, he crouched down and dug into his pocket, cursing when the wallet snagged on some loose threads. "Goddamn it!" Finally pulling it free, he quickly found the small foil square he'd placed there that morning in the hopes there could be a repeat of their last date. He hadn't considered the possibility of needing it before they'd even left the house.

Just as he was about to stand, Daryl looked up, heat suffusing him at the sight before him: lean legs, golden thatch of curls, flat tummy, perfect round breasts, blue eyes hungry with desire. He knelt at her feet like a worshiper before a goddess, struck by her beauty. When she crooked a finger at him, he stood up before rolling the condom on.

She raised her knee, resting against his hip, opening herself up to him, but she was too short for him to take in that pose. Daryl reached behind her and, cupping his hands under her ass,

raised her so he could slide in effortlessly. They both let out a groan when he was finally sheathed inside her, surrounded by her moist heat.

He leaned forward and claimed her lips, kissing her passionately, trying to express what he couldn't say with words. She clung to him desperately, her legs wrapped around his waist, feet hooked at the ankles. She met his every thrust, her breaths coming out in quiet whimpers. "You feel so good," she spoke against the shell of his ear, her tongue darting out to trace it. "I've been wanting this all week, your cock inside me, fucking me so deep, driving me crazy..."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Daryl ground out against the slick skin of her shoulder, the rush of his pulse pounding in his ears, almost drowning out the sound of skin slapping against skin and Beth's moans. He'd never been as hard as he was right then, never wanted anyone as much as he did the woman in his arms.

"Oh yeah. Daryl, oh *God*." She came suddenly and hard, nails digging into his shoulders, body bowed away from the wall, inner muscles clamped tight around him, sending him over the edge right along with her.

It took them both a solid two minutes to come off their high, chests heaving, ragged breaths pulled from burning lungs.

"Gonna have to give up smoking if we keep this up," Daryl half-joked as his heart continued to try and pound its way out of his rib cage. He gradually let her down onto shaky legs and pulled the condom off, tossing it into the trash.

They dressed quietly as the storm continued to rage outside. Beth bent down and picked up the papers the wind had blown over, knocking them against the counter to line them up into a tidy pile and standing the bottle of dish soap on it to keep them in place. "Wanna give me a tour?"

"Ain't nothing to see." It was dumb, and he *knew* it was dumb, but Daryl couldn't shake the feeling that exposing Beth to his house would somehow taint her. As if every mismatched piece of secondhand furniture, every stain on that old carpet that was already old and stained when they moved in, even that fucking muskrat Merle insisted on having stuffed and mounted, would tarnish her.

She sidled up to him, slipping her hand into his. "I *want* to see it. It's part of you, Daryl, whether or not you like it."

Then it dawned on him, a revelation, that it could also work the other way around. Maybe her mere presence in this house would exorcise its demons, brighten the shadows, bring a bit of goodness where it had been absent for so long.

He squeezed her hand and nodded, tugging her towards the living room, where he pointed out a plaid recliner.

"That chair's where my dad spent most of his last months, when he was dying. Sat there, wasting away, weighing about ninety pounds soaking wet, smoking cigarette after cigarette,

reading his fucking Playboy magazines.” In his mind’s eye, Will still sat there, slouched, skin grey, eyes yellowed, wheezing, coughing up blood, shaking hands turning page after page. He let out a mirthless laugh. “They say folks change when they’re about to die, like they’re tryin’ to make amends for all the shit they did in their life. Not Dad. He was a bastard right to the end.”

The solid presence of her hand in his stopped him from walking away, from cursing her for making him face his demons (maybe he was the one who needed exorcising, and not the house). He’d known, somehow, that the tour wasn’t so much about seeing a living room or bedrooms; it was about finding out who he was, what he’d been through to get where he was.

Beth followed his lead and quietly looked at the living room. He could tell she was taking it all in, every detail, and wondered if the artist in her was seeing more of what was hidden beneath, if she was seeing anything else with a story to tell.

“Does the muskrat have a name?” she asked, attention fixed on the stuffed rodent. She reached out and trailed a finger along the soft fur of its haunch.

He stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out if she was pulling his leg. She seemed serious enough, so he gave her a serious answer. “No. The muskrat doesn’t have a name.” He paused, curious. “Should it?”

“Well, *yeah*. Stuffed animals are less creepy if they have names. Especially silly ones.”

Daryl could see the twinkle in her eye, the muscle at the corner of her mouth fighting a grin. The girl had a terrible poker face. But he wanted to see where this was going, so he played along. “Like what?”

“Oh, I dunno.” Turning to face away from him, most likely to hide a full-blown smile, she pretended to think. “Elmer, maybe? Horatio? Oh! Maybe we can call ‘im Francis - that’s the patron saint of animals.”

“Francis the muskrat?” he replied, inflecting extra disbelief into his voice just to keep the game going. “Or do you mean *Saint* Francis the muskrat?”

Her control slipped and she devolved into a fit of giggles. Daryl felt his own mood lighten; how the hell long had it been since he’d been playful? Since before life had worn him down, had ground him down to a bitter, angry shell of a man, that’s when. Acting on impulse, he leaned over and picked her up over his shoulder in a fireman carry as she laughed and squirmed.

“Extended tour’s over,” he called over her squeals. “You just earned yourself the discount version.” His legs carried them past the exercise bench with the cushion patched up with electrical tape, then through the hallway where he gave her a brief description of each door they passed. “That’s Merle’s room. That’s the basement door. I got locked down there more times’n I can count; you really don’t wanna go down there. That’s the bathroom. And *this*, ” *he shoved the last door at the end of the hallway open with his foot, “is my room.”*

She bounced once when he dropped her on his bed and lay there beaming up at him, her cheeks rosy. "I like it when you smile," she told him, looking up at him as he held himself above her, one knee on the bed and one foot still on the ground.

"You make it easy to smile."

"You deserve to be happy, Daryl. I know you feel like an old man. You had a rough life and what you been through, that'd wear anyone thin. But you're not old. You got your whole life ahead of you." She reached up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "And I want to help you. I'm gonna be your little ray o' sunshine."

Maybe he was the one with the terrible poker face. How else could she read him so well, how could she see truths he'd even hidden from himself? Yes, he felt old. Felt worn through, like an old shoe. Over the last week, though, he'd felt different, less bogged down by life; had even felt the tuggings of optimism. It was as though Beth had made her way inside him and had parted the curtains and opened the windows, like she'd done a spring cleaning of his soul.

"My ray o' sunshine and my breath of fresh air," he whispered, pressing his lips to hers.

Their quickie in the kitchen had taken the edge off and, as a result, the kiss they shared was lazy and unhurried.

"Hold on," Beth interrupted. "Lemme scoot up so you can lie down beside me." She toed her sandals off and slid up the bed until her head rested on the pillow, Daryl following closely. They lay face to face like they had on their first date, on the truck bed. Unlike that night, though, there was no hesitancy on either of their part. They picked back up where they'd left off, sharing deep, languid kisses, hands exploring, fingers seeking slivers of bare skin.

Soon, their kisses took on a more desperate air; hands pushed at clothing, wanting to reveal more skin. Without saying a word, they both sat up at the same time and began to undress. Daryl would have found it amusing if his nerves hadn't been buzzing with need for Beth. He did spare a thought to wonder if it would ever recede or go away, this ever-present desire for her.

He really hoped not, because with her, he was the happiest he'd ever been.

They turned down the blankets and Beth slipped in between the sheets, Daryl following after grabbing a condom from his night stand. The young woman threw her leg over his waist, reaching between them to take him in hand. She closed her small fist around him, pumping while he unwrapped the condom.

When he finally slid inside her, Beth hummed in pleasure, smiling up at him languorously. Daryl moved slowly and deliberately, focusing on her reactions, taking mental notes of what she seemed to prefer. He noted how she pressed herself up against him when he kissed a spot just below her ear, how her breath caught when he rolled her nipples between his fingers, and how she squirmed when he'd dragged his fingers lightly down her side.

They moved together, branding each other's skin with whispered promises, the wind and the rain their only witnesses.

When Daryl felt the first stirrings of his release, he skated his lips up the delicate column of her neck, pausing over the small love bite he'd marked her with. "You close?"

"I been close for a while." Her breath caught when he shifted and changed angles, and she let out an almost silent whimper. "You?"

"Yeah. Don't want it to end; feels too fuckin' good," he confessed, changing again to shallow thrusts. Here in his bed, in her arms, cock deep inside her heat, there was nowhere else he wanted to be, nothing else he wanted to be doing.

Despite their slow pace, they could only hold on for so long. "Stop holding back," she begged, legs wrapped tightly around him. Her hands flew to the bars of his headboard, gripping them for purchase. "*Please.*"

She didn't have to ask twice. Daryl let slip the tight control he'd had over himself and just let go, giving into the pleasures driving him.

Beth came with his name on her lips, her body going rigid beneath him; Daryl followed right behind, having no choice but to be carried along in her wake. Then he heard a familiar *crack!*; he opened his eyes and stared into her shocked face as she held one of the spindles she'd been grasping.

He couldn't help it. Daryl let out a bark of laughter at the look of surprise on her face.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry! I didn't think I pulled that hard!"

If she hadn't looked close to tears, Daryl would have teased her. Instead, he took the wooden rod and dropped it off the side of the bed and kissed her tenderly. "Was already busted. Don't worry yourself about it."

"But..."

"But nothing. The damn thing's been busted for years. I keep slipping it back in instead of fixin' it. I'll just glue it and put a couple of screws in it so it don't do that again."

She looked up uncertainly at him, worrying her bottom lip, before a giggle escaped. "*It was* funny, wasn't it?"

"Damn near the funniest thing I ever saw," he agreed. "Shoulda seen the look on your face."

They laughed, shared a quiet moment just basking in their togetherness, stealing kisses. Daryl rolled over and tossed the condom in his trash bin before lying back down, holding his arm out so Beth could curl her small body against his.

This was so close to perfection he was afraid to breathe, as if a puff of air could scatter it, leaving nothing but an outline of where it had been. He wanted to hold onto Beth forever,

wanted to stay here in his bed with her, feel her heartbeat against his side, the satin of her skin beneath his fingertips, the warmth of her in his heart.

He wasn't so jaded or worn down that he didn't recognize happiness when he felt it. Even if he'd seldom felt it in his 36 years.

A growling pulled him from his thoughts. He looked down to the woman in his arms.

"Guess I shoulda had breakfast after all," she said, blushing.

"Not much to eat in this house. Nothing healthy, anyway."

She gave him a sly look. "Betcha I can find something in your kitchen to throw together."

"Don't get your hopes up. Ain't no stick of gum in there you can MacGyver into a pot roast."

She laughed. He loved the sound of her laughter. "I'll show you. You'll see."

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Daryl reached over to help himself to a third serving of tuna macaroni salad, dropping a heaping spoonful onto his plate.

"It's better with egg," Beth said, eyes narrowed, chewing her mouthful as if she was judging at a county fair. "Still, I think I mighta earned myself an 'I told ya so'."

"Damn straight you did," Daryl replied through a mouthful of pasta. "Can't remember the last time I had a home cooked meal."

Beth pushed her noodles around on her plate, lining them up into a little wall before scooping another forkful. "Was it when your mom was still around?"

"Nah. Mom wasn't the type to cook up much o' anything. Merle had a girlfriend once who knew her way around a kitchen. She didn't put up with him long, though. Went back to TV dinners and canned beans after that."

"You should come with me to my parents' house for dinner tomorrow. Then you'd get to enjoy some real home cooking."

His hand froze halfway to his mouth before he recovered and brought his fork the rest of the way. She wanted him to meet her parents, which meant she wanted her parents to meet him. *Him.*

A vision of her introducing him to her parents came to Daryl: they smile at him, because that's the kind of people they are, but it doesn't quite reach their eyes. Inside, they're wondering what their daughter is thinking, hooking up with a man like him. They're also wondering if he's taking advantage of her, because that's the sort of thing an older guy from the wrong side of town might do. It's certainly the kind of thing Merle would do. Has done.

"Nah," he finally replied. "Don't think it's the right time," he lied, hoping she wouldn't push.

To his relief, she didn't. She just nodded and finished her food before suggesting they go for a walk. The storm had ended while she'd been making lunch, clouds making way for sunshine and blue skies.

"We never did get to go to the fair. This way, we can still get a bit of fresh air in. Maybe we can walk to the park?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Daryl agreed. Although he had no complaints about how they'd spent the morning, he was beginning to feel locked in. It would feel good to get out and feel the sun on his face.

They washed the dishes before heading out, which he'd found tedious. She'd tutted when he'd suggested they go for their walk first. "It's just a couple of things; won't take us five minutes."

Beth was uncharacteristically quiet when they set out for their stroll, and if she hadn't reached for his hand, lacing her fingers between his, he'd have thought she was upset.

It had been years since he'd explored his neighborhood on foot. He took a drag of his cigarette and mulled over how much had changed since he was a kid; new folks had moved in, houses were better kept, lawns maintained. It made him realize that the world had moved on, yet he and Merle were still stuck in the same spot in time like in an episode of the Twilight Zone.

They walked along, passing a few houses before coming across one where someone was also outside. Beth waved to the woman, who was righting a few flowerpots overturned by the storm; the woman returned her wave with a smile.

"My daddy grew up with a father who was an abusive alcoholic," she said without preamble. "He had a terrible childhood and left home when he was fifteen, never going back. He never found it in him to forgive his dad, even refused to visit him when he found out he was dying."

She let that hang between them as they turned onto the path that led to the small park. The playground was already teeming with kids laughing and splashing around, and Daryl felt a pang for the childhood he never had.

The path meandered over a small hill, leading to a man-made pond with benches nearby; across the walkway was a flowerbed in full bloom, bright splashes of red, pink and yellow contrasting the dark mulch underneath. All of this was pretty much in his backyard and he hadn't known. Hadn't stepped foot outside his narrow little world to see what lay beyond it.

Beth headed towards the bench and he followed her. They sat down, hands still clasped. "That kind of childhood stays with someone, no matter what happens later. After he married his first wife, Maggie's mom, he became an alcoholic just like his daddy. He was out drinking every night, was a hard man to live with. Luckily, he quit before Maggie was born, and never allowed another drop on his land."

She took a deep breath and looked at him. "I know you think my family is perfect, that there's no way they'd accept you. I can see it in the way you look at me sometimes. Like you

think what's developing between us is some sort of bubble that's gonna pop. Like I'm gonna wake up tomorrow or the day after and realize you're not good enough for me and leave you."

Unable to hold her gaze any longer because, once again, she'd seen right through him, he turned to look at the ducks. Her presence beside him kept him grounded, helped give him the strength to fight off those exact thoughts: she's too good for you, you'll only hold her back, don't try because you're just gonna fail.

"Your past shapes you, but *you* shape your future, Daryl. I ain't going anywhere unless you want me to."

Beth leaned her head against his shoulder and they sat in a comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts, until they heard a musical chime and the shouts of children.

"Feel like some ice cream?" Daryl asked. That was something else he hadn't done in a while: treat himself.

"I'd love one," she replied, smiling.

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"So, where's Merle?" Beth asked, licking a drip of vanilla soft serve from her cone before it reached her fingers.

Daryl watched her tongue dart out and nearly groaned out loud. Instead, he tore his eyes away from her and back ahead of him. "He went, uh..." he hesitated, but then decided he didn't want any lies between them. "He went out stealing with a buddy of his."

She nodded, staring ahead as she crunched into her cone. They sat side by side on the front steps of his house, eating their ice cream and enjoying the sunshine. It was their turn to smile back at people who walked by. "When's he coming back?"

"Said he'd be back on Monday. Why?"

It was her turn to hesitate, ever so slightly, but he caught the pause before she answered. "I was wondering if you wanted some company for dinner. And breakfast."

Did he want to spend as much time with her as he could? Fall asleep with her in his arms? Wake up beside her? It was a no brainer. "Hell, yeah. I'd really like that."

That earned him a smile. Just as an older couple walking a small white dog approached, she leaned in, her mouth right by his ear. "You know what I think of when I see you eating your ice cream?"

He shrugged, distracted by the feel of her warm breath against his skin. The couple walked by and he nodded at them while Beth returned their hello.

"All I can think of is when you had your tongue on me like that."

Of course, she had to say that right after he'd taken a bite of cone. He choked, the bite went down the wrong way, and he fell into a coughing fit while she laughed, patting him on the back.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to hold back more laughter. "I could've had better timing on that."

"Glad you're staying the night," he replied once he got his breath back. "Putting ideas like that in my head. Gonna keep you up late tonight, Beth."

She licked her lips, looked at him slyly and smiled. "I'll hold you to your word."

They stood on the cusp of returning inside, possibly not making it as far as the kitchen wall this time. Beth seemed to sense this as well; she stood up, walked down the few steps and faced the overrun flowerbed. "You got a pair of pruning shears?"

Daryl walked down to join her, staring at the small jungle growing in the beds. "You sure about that? I don't think anyone's touched this since before we been here."

"I ain't gonna clean the whole thing. I just want to get that dead growth off of them roses." She walked over to the nearest one, pulling a few weeds out from around it. "It's a miracle they're still blooming. Guess they're fighters, too, just like you Dixon boys."

"I think I might know a Greene who's pretty tough, too," he replied. "Not sure if we got any pruners; let me go see what we got. While you're doing that, I'm gonna finally give that truck an oil change."

It only struck him as he was sliding the oil pan in place just how domestic they were being. And he found he didn't mind one bit.

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"Where'd you learn to use chopsticks?"

They sat side by side on the couch, sharing an order of pad Thai, something Daryl had never eaten before but agreed to try. He'd figured it was a weekend for trying new things, so why not?

"Maggie," Beth replied around a mouthful of noodles. "She and her college roommates always eat sushi on study nights. When she comes home, we go out for sushi or Thai. It's our thing."

The TV played in the background, Big Trouble in Little China mostly forgotten, while they chatted. "What's she studyin'?"

"She's majoring in chemistry. Figures that'll keep her options open, since lots of different industries hire folks with chem degrees."

"What about you? Didn't wanna go to college?"

“Nah. I was never good at math or science, and I wasn’t interested in going to college for the subjects I *was* good at. Anyway, college is too expensive to go when you don’t really have a plan.” She looked at him and shrugged. “Thought I’d figure it out when I was ready.”

“I never even finished high school.” It hadn’t ever bothered Daryl before that he hadn’t stuck it through and gotten his diploma, but he never thought he’d need it. Whatever schemes Merle came up with didn’t require math or English, so why have it?

Beth was quiet, so he knew she was thinking. That was one thing he’d learned about her: when it came to talking about his situation, she carefully considered her words before speaking. That was a quality that could have saved his ass on more than one occasion.

“Have you considered going back to school? They got high school programs for adults, where you can finish earning your diploma. Then you’d have a better choice of jobs, or could even get an apprenticeship.”

His first reaction was to laugh, because the thought of him going back to school was a laughable one. He’d never been smart enough to succeed even when he did attend school. “No way, man. I’m too old.”

“It’s *adult* high school, Daryl. Lots of students would be about your age.” She put her bowl and chopsticks down on the TV tray in front of her and laid her hands on her lap. “I ain’t telling you to go. Only you can make that decision. I’m just letting you know the choice exists, that’s all.”

He stared at her soberly, weighing her words. The seed was planted in his mind, and already it tried to take root, like those tenacious rose bushes in his front yard. “I was never a good student,” he argued weakly.

“You never had a reason for being there you actually believed in.”

“Might require a lot of time.” An even lamer excuse.

“What else you doing with your time?”

“Having sex with you.”

That earned him a giggle. “I’m sure we could schedule around school hours, whatever those’d be.”

“Merle.” One word, so much weight.

“Yeah, there’s Merle. He’d have a hard time understanding, wouldn’t he?”

“He’d never get it.” At best, his brother would try to dissuade him (aka *talk some sense into ya*); at worst, he would sabotage Daryl’s schoolwork, causing him to fail.

“I can’t speak for Merle, but if you decide you want to try, I’ll help however I can. But I’ll respect your decision either way.”

“Thanks.” And he meant it. He appreciated her concern, he appreciated her help, but more than anything, he appreciated her backing off and giving him some time to think.

She leaned back against the arm of the sofa, turning her attention back to the movie, and slipped her foot onto his thigh. She’d taken a quick shower after pruning the roses and pulling out the worst of the weeds, opting to slip into one of his T-shirts after. The new pose caused the shirt to ride up, giving him a prize view of her thighs and panties.

By all appearances, she seemed engrossed in the movie, but he sensed she was faking it. The way she worried her bottom lip between her teeth, played with the shirt’s hem, kept fidgeting to get more comfortable; she was teasing herself as much as she was teasing him. He wanted to know what was going through that mind of hers, had a feeling he’d approve.

Turning his gaze back to Jack Burton’s misadventures, he placed his hand on her ankle and began drawing circles with his thumb. She let out a breath and shifted, pressing her foot more solidly against him, letting her bent legs fall apart wider. Slowly, he slid his palm up her shin, fingers tracing the lean muscle of her calf. These games she played, where she teased him, drew him out, made him want her so bad he ached; he wondered if she’d ever played them with her previous boyfriends, if there actually were men out there who’d had a taste of Beth Greene and could live without her. One night and one day with her, and he was well and truly addicted.

When her toe traced the outline of his hardening cock, he suggested they move to the bedroom. “I wanna watch the rest of this,” she replied, eyes still glued to the screen as she teased out an erection.

“What’s goin’ on in the movie?” he asked, calling her bluff.

“They’re in Lo Pan’s place, tryin’ to find the two girls.”

Damn, she was a good multitasker.

He shuffled a few inches closer to her, just enough to be able to reach farther up her leg. Her thigh was warm and smooth beneath his hand. Her foot faltered when he swept his thumb across the white cotton between her legs, but she didn’t pull it away. Following her lead, he kept his touch on the fabric, teasing, rubbing, circling where he knew she’d want it most. He knew he had it right when she whimpered and her eyes fluttered closed, any pretense of paying attention to the movie abandoned.

When her hand slipped between her legs, sliding under her panties, he almost came right then and there. His cock throbbed within the constraints of his jeans; he pulled his hand away to pop the button from its hole and slide the zipper down just enough to ease some of the pressure. Her fingers moved under the fabric and there was no way in hell he wasn’t going to watch that, commit the image to memory. “Lift up,” he whispered roughly, sliding the garment off when she raised her hips.

Hypnotized, he watched as her finger slipped inside her, gathering moisture and using it to circle her clit, changing directions, changing speed. His heart was beating so soundly his pulse rang in his ears, the thrumming almost drowning out Beth’s quiet sighs of pleasure.

Unable to continue just watching, he knelt, placing one forearm next to her head on the sofa's armrest, and held himself above her. He slid one finger inside her, groaning at how wet she was. "Oh, *yeah*," she moaned, moving her hips in sync with his finger.

Daryl looked down between them, watching as she pleased herself, and added a second finger. Her movements became uncoordinated, her finger pausing as she focused on his actions. Her skin was flushed pink, her hair spread in a halo around her, her lips parted in the shape of an 'o'. "*Fuck* you're beautiful," he told her, unable to believe that this goddess of a woman chose to be here, sharing moments of such extreme intimacy as this, with him. "I want to watch you come. You're so close; I know you can feel it."

"So close, Daryl," she confirmed, her eyes squeezed close.

"You want me to add another finger?"

"God yes, *please*..."

She came almost as soon as he added a third finger, her internal muscles gripping him tightly as she rode out a long, drawn-out climax that seemed to go on and on. Chest heaving, she relaxed, sinking back into the worn couch cushions, a dreamy smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Wow. My first double," she said, still breathing heavily.

It took Daryl a moment to catch on to what she meant; when he clued in, he leaned forward and captured her mouth, trying to convey all the emotions rolling inside of him. He stilled her hand when she reached for his cock. "Not here," he said, shaking his head.

"We can christen it," she replied playfully, patting the velvety fabric of the cushion beneath her.

"This couch's had all its sacraments already. I want you in my bed, where we got all the room we need."

"Alright." Her eyes darted around them. "Maybe we should..."

"If you say we should clean up," he interrupted, "I'm gonna have a few choice words for you."

She laughed. "No. We can just shove the containers in the fridge. I meant we might want to close up and turn the lights off."

They worked quickly and were headed down the hallway to his room when Beth called out. "Wait!"

Daryl stopped so abruptly he nearly pitched forward. "What?" he asked, turning around to look at her.

The young woman stood still behind him, bottom lip caught between her teeth. She was thinking again, but what about, he had no idea. How she could be thinking about anything other than them in his bed, he didn't know.

Needless to say, it took him completely by surprise when she pushed him back against the wall, hard enough to push a breath out of him. “The fu...” Her mouth was on his, fiercely, desperately, passionately, the suddenness of the kiss leaving him off balance. He was still trying to gather his wits when he realized she’d pushed his pants and underwear down. “Beth, what are you doing?”

“Shh.” She placed a finger over his lips. “Not a word.”

Then she dropped to her knees before him, right there in the hallway on the worn parquet flooring, and took him in her mouth.

His mind went blank. At that moment, nothing else existed except for the basement door he was facing, the wall holding him up, and Beth’s hot mouth. He was already so close and she knew it. There was no teasing, no drawing it out; her mouth and fist worked in tandem, and it was sloppy and wet and then she took him in so deep he could feel her throat closing around the head of his cock. “Jesus!” he cried out, slamming his head back into the wall hard enough to see stars. His release hit so swiftly he didn’t have time to warn her. She kept her mouth on him the entire time, and if he hadn’t screwed his eyes shut as his orgasm washed over him, he was sure it would have been one hell of a scene to watch.

“Fuck, woman,” he said through panting breaths, his lungs burning. “What the hell was that?”

“What’re you gonna think about next time you see that door?” She raised an eyebrow knowingly, then sashayed to his bedroom, leaving him staring at the door in wonder. *Yup*, his inner voice agreed, *you won’t be thinkin’ of bein’ locked down there anymore, that’s for sure.*

It was these purposeful gestures of hers that made him think that maybe, just maybe, he could fall in love with Beth Greene.

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He wondered, as they lay in bed, skin against skin, sharing lazy kisses, how something so new could feel like it had always been there. Like he’d always spent his days with Beth, going for walks, or eating take-out and watching a movie, or making love into the wee hours of the morning.

She pulled back, laying her head on her half of the pillow, lips pulled into a contented smile. Her gaze landed on him and she let out a breathy little laugh. “Oops. Looks like I might o’ got carried away a bit.” She reached over and gently traced a spot on his throat. “That’s quite the hickey I gave you.”

“Don’t bother me none,” he replied.

“You don’t care if Merle finds out what we’ve been up to?”

“Merle’s gonna end up gettin’ it outta me one way or another. Might as well be honest about it, because I ain’t hiding what we’re up to.”

He smirked when she took his picture with her phone - "*Smile!*" - and then leaned in when she showed him a close-up of the love bite. She was right; it wasn't insignificant and there was no way Merle would miss it. He could paint it neon green and it wouldn't be any less visible.

Also noticeable in the photo was how happy he looked; the change was obvious even to his own eyes. Beth had taken years off him in just one day. He'd known it from the start, that she was different from anyone he knew, but he couldn't have known just how much she could change him in so little time.

Her yawn reminded him of how late it was. He looked at the time on her phone before handing it back and saw it was past two. No wonder they were tired. "C'mon," he said, reaching over her to turn the light off. "Time for some shut-eye."

The room was quiet for about 20 seconds before Beth spoke. "Daryl?"

He'd already been halfway to sleep. "Hmm?"

"You snore?"

"Dunno. You can let me know tomorrow morning if I do." His comment earned him a playful smack in the arm and a goodnight before he closed his eyes and fell soundly asleep.

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The sun shone bright the next morning, and not for the first time, Daryl cursed his east-facing window. Groaning, he rolled over and away from the bright light, startling when his arm hit something warm and soft. Beth, sleeping on her side facing away from him, mumbled in her sleep but didn't wake up. It was already getting warm in his room, but he slid over anyway to mold himself to her. Her hair smelled like the Irish Spring shampoo that was in his shower and was fanned out across the pillow; he gently gathered it, moving it aside so he could nestle against her and breathe her in.

"Are you smelling my hair?" a drowsy voice asked.

"I'm smellin' *you*," he corrected, his cock starting to take notice of how her ass was wiggling against him as she spooned closer.

"I smell gross," she chuckled. "I need some deodorant."

"Nah, ya smell..." He'd never been good at English. Sure as hell never read or wrote poetry. His mind scrolled through a limited vocabulary until he hit on a word that suited what he wanted to say. "Mouthwatering."

"Mouthwatering?" she giggled.

His hand slid up her side to cup a breast. "Delicious," he said, taking a playful nip at her shoulder. He then moved his hand south, to the apex of her thighs. "Tempting," he whispered against the shell of her ear. A groan escaped him when he felt she was already wet for him.

Impatiently, Beth grabbed the box of condoms sitting on the nightstand and held it out behind her, nearly dropping it on his head in her haste. In what was now a practised hand, Daryl took one, tore it from the packet, and rolled it on before entering her. She moaned, arching her back, and pressed back against him, meeting his thrusts.

Both still groggy with sleep, their movements were desperate, uncoordinated. "Hold on," Beth said. "I keep slippin' away from ya. Maybe we can change positions?"

"Sure. Whatever you want." He would have agreed to anything if it meant feeling her heat again.

"How 'bout something we haven't tried yet?" She rolled onto her knees and forearms, her ass waving enticingly in the air, and looked over her shoulder at him.

"Pinch me," he muttered, getting up onto his knees behind her. Had he not spent a day having sex with Beth, didn't know how open-minded and liberal she was, he wouldn't have believed he was awake. They groaned in tandem when he slid into her, moving slowly at first then more confidently. "This okay?" he asked.

"Fuck, yeah," she replied, rocking back against him. He watched as she moved one arm underneath her, nearly falling over when he felt her hand grip his cock as it moved in and out of her.

"Beth," he growled, feeling his control slipping. "You're gonna cut this awful short if ya keep doin' that."

Her reply was a moan and a shudder as she came, the hand gripping him dropping to the mattress to twist in his sheets.

Daryl hung in as long as he could after that, which ended up not being very long, before following her over the edge. Panting, he lay overtop of her, resting his forearms next to hers. He got uncomfortably warm very quickly and straightened back up, his skin slick with sweat. "Sorry. It gets hotter 'n blue blazes in here in the morning when the sun's shining."

"S'okay. My bedroom window faces west, so I get that in the evenings," she replied as she sat up, mopping her hair away from her face. She stretched, the sight of her nearly pulling him back in for more. "Whatcha gonna make me for breakfast?"

"Been told I make a mean bowl of Corn Flakes." With Merle gone for a few days, he knew there would be some cereal left for them to have something to eat. After all the calories they'd burned, he wished he had something more substantial to offer but he didn't, and he wasn't going to fret over it because he knew she wouldn't care.

"Mmm, that sounds perfect. I'm gonna go tame this mane into a ponytail before I turn someone to stone." She got up and, untroubled by her nudity, grabbed her underwear and headed for the bathroom.

Daryl stood there, T-shirt hanging loosely in his grasp, watching her walk out of his bedroom. *Damn*, she looked fine.

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“So, what are your plans for the day?”

They sat at the small kitchen table, Beth back in her pretty green dress and hair successfully gathered up into a ponytail. He’d been right yesterday. The house didn’t tarnish her at all; instead, she made it brighter, more livable by her mere presence.

“Don’t rightly know,” he admitted. “Guess I’ll just putter around; there’s always shit that needs to be done around here, no matter what Merle says. What about you? Going to your parents’?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna bring my equipment and take a roundabout way to the farm, in case I find something that catches my eye.” She got up and placed her dishes in the sink, filling it with soapy water. “I really shoulda had it with me yesterday, when we were at the park. My eye kept catching perfect images.”

“Leave that; I’ll wash them up later,” he said, pulling her hands gently out of the water and drying them off with a cloth. “I guess you’ll just have to come back at some point to get those pictures.”

“I’d love that.” She reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck loosely. “I had a nice time yesterday and this morning,” she said quietly. “I kept wondering if you were gonna kick me out for being here too long.”

“Never gonna happen,” he replied immediately. “Can’t imagine being sick of havin’ you around. You made this house feel like a home, and it ain’t never felt like that.”

Beth smiled up at him, beaming, like he’d given her the world on a platter. “Then maybe we can do it again the next time Merle’s out for a couple of days.”

“I’d like that.” *I’d rather you didn’t have to leave. I’d rather this house continue feeling like a home.*

“Til then, maybe you can come to my place. *My* sofa hasn’t been christened yet. Or my shower; that’s something we haven’t tried yet,” she added playfully.

“Damn, woman, keep talking like that and I’m gonna drag you back to my bed.” Instead, he kissed her, memorizing the taste of her, the feel of her body against his.

“Okay, I really gotta go if I want to stop home and change before hopping on the road.” Reluctantly, they parted and Daryl walked Beth back to her car. They kissed one more time, much more tamely than they had in front of Rosie’s, and then she drove off with a wave.

Daryl watched the car until she’d turned off his street. Lighting a cigarette, he walked back toward the house. The work she’d done in the flowerbeds, only an hour’s worth of weeding and trimming, made a noticeable difference. It wouldn’t take him very long to finish what she hadn’t gotten to. He was pretty sure that whichever of Merle’s acquaintances had dropped off

the lumber had also left a few bags of mulch; they'd seemed useless at the time, like having stolen goods just for the fun of it, but now they'd actually be put to good use.

He finished his cigarette and crushed the butt underfoot before heading back inside. Although he missed Beth, he appreciated the quiet of an empty house. It would help him think, because the last 24 hours had left him with a lot to think about: relationships, work, school, standing up to Merle, breaking bad habits and starting good ones.

Well, he thought to himself, flipping to the want ads in the morning paper, *no better time to finally start actin' like an adult than right now*. Beth would be proud.

End Notes

And there you have it! Please take a moment and leave a few words to let me know what you thought!

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